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Poster

Magazine Experimenting

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

SAN FRANCISCO—The offices of Ramparts magazine have been pulled out of here and relocated across the bay in the city of Berkeley's low-rent district. Ramparts, broke and reorganized under the bankruptcy act, is so poor it puts out one issue at a time and hopes, but its quondam editor, Warren Hinckle III, remains on this side of the bay, drinking awesome amounts of Scotch whiskey.

He does this at Cookie's, a Kearney Street tavern hangout for cops and other old-time urban types. There are pictures of Jack Webb, Orval Faubus and George Wallace on the walls; in the men's room somebody's written that "Mulcreyy is a fruit." It's the kind of a joint that is prized as a genuine remnant at a moment when people think the genuine may only be found in second-hand stores.

Cookie's isn't where you'd expect to see the editor of the most influential left magazine since The Masses, but Hinckle likes it, and he says that his ex-star writer, Eldridge Cleaver, used to like it too. It fits the profile that Hinckle shows the world—mission district Irishman, boozer, ex-cityside newspaper reporter, unpredictable madman, lover of the genuine.

At 31, Hinckle has already done too much to be considered a young nut working on becoming a colorful old eccentric. Although Ramparts lost upwards of $4 million—"I tried to save it by chasing millionaires up and down mountains in Switzerland" — the magazine has had an incalculable impact on American periodical publishing.

When Hinckle started in the mid-'60s, left-wing thought, left political analysis were excluded from American mass media. Even muckraking had been relegated to fly-specky journals that lived on the back racks of a few New York City newsstands. Hinckle created radical slick, a beautifully designed publication on shiny paper with four-color pictures of startling editorial content.

At its height, Ramparts itself probably never sold more than a quarter of a million copies, but its influence on other magazines has been immense. Harper's hired Dugald Stermer, the gifted art director who made Ramparts, to redesign what had been its bleakly dull product. Atlantic followed by redoing itself through the medium of borrowing many of Stermer's ideas. Rolling Stone, the country's most successful rock magazine, hired Stermer's assistant to devise its distinctive and now also widely imitated layout.

Hinckle also found photographers and writers who, if they had nothing else and they often had much more, wrote with a zipping energy that the Eastern publications lacked. His magazine brought the expose back into vogue and popularized a wider and more biting treatment of events. It's inconceivable that Life would have done its celebrated issue of the pictures of the Vietnam war dead had there been no Ramparts. Where the New Yorker had accustomed people to long articles in depth, Ramparts explored breadth, the relating of an event to many elements across a society.

As a businessman, Hinckle was as much a failure as he was a brilliant editorial achiever. There are dozens of stories about his money orgies, most of which he says probably are true, including the time, during the airplane strike, that he flew to New York via Paris on the grounds that it was the only way to get there. Wherever he went, it was always first class, even at the 1968 Democratic convention where the magazine's left-radical staff had to suffer their boss and his friends drinking it up in a suite in the city's most expensive hotel while they swallowed tear gas down on the streets.

"There's something about expense accounts and Ramparts that drove the left crazy. If we'd lost that money with a commercial magazine, nobody would have said anything, but the left is schizophrenic about money," says Hinckle, more in explanation than defense. "The richest people on the left drive Volkswagens, own IBM stock and give people money to build bombs."

He appears to find the criticism a little confusing, and perhaps he really does because Hinckle is more of an editorial genius than a radical who can understand other radicals. "The job of journalism should be to make ideas work, to drive people crazy, and not just record things," says Hinckle, who's attracted to the swirl of leftist thought because it supplies the analytical and conceptual means for making the journalism which drives people nuts. Creativity in American arts and letters comes almost exclusively from the left, and Hinckle knows this and uses it without particularly subscribing to it.

Hinckle ran out of financial expedients and resigned from Ramparts about the time the Nixon administration was assuming office. The left-liberal anti-Johnson coalition was falling apart; the hated man who'd given it unity was out of public life, and with him, Hinckle thinks, the reader enthusiasm which helped make Ramparts began to disintegrate too. It was time to raise money for a new magazine, which would be different, less political, more diffusely cultural, less arresting visually. He was looking for something a little softer, a little more literary.

The new product, which has now gone through seven monthly issues, is called Scanlan's—named, we're told, after a heroically anonymous Irish pig farmer. Designed by Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, it is different but quite as handsome as Ramparts in its own way. While Scanlan's is more broad-gauge with articles on Winnie the Pooh and how you, too, can forge credit cards and rip off corporate America, it can still make politics read like more than a couple of old bores trying to out-talk each other. The October issue, for example, should be a doozy.

[illegible] Hinckle said. "It's about guerrilla warfare in the United States. For some